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SUBJECT: SERBIA: COALITION SCENARIOS COALESCING

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) The current trend in polling data suggests that the three major parties (DS, DSS, and SRS) are currently the only parties that will definitively jump the 5 percent threshold for participation in the parliament. The Socialists are on the verge of threshold, and most pollsters agree that they will probably exceed it. The main pollsters also agree that the chances of an SRS-led government are slim, even if the SPS qualifies. The DSS (which may choose to run with its current coalition partner NS) and DS will probably be able to form a parliamentary majority on their own. However, if coalitions of smaller democratic parties, such as Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) "Plus" (which consists of LDP, Civic Alliance of Serbia (GSS), League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV), and Social Democratic Union (SDU)), were also able to make the threshold, then it would ensure a democratic majority in Parliament. These smaller progressive parties could keep a DS/DSS-led government on a forward track. End Summary.

Boost in Radical Support Deceiving

12. (SBU) Local media has reported that the latest polls show the SRS increasing in support by as much as six percent. What the media fail to explain, and what the leading pollsters in Serbia have confirmed to us, is that this increase in support is in direct correlation to the decrease in support to the SPS over the same period. Support for the SRS and the SPS comes from the same section of the Serbian electorate. When this pool of voters becomes disgruntled with the SRS for being too harsh in its rhetoric, they swing toward the SPS. Over the past month, the SRS has profited from the passing of the constitution, and courted some of its voting bloc back into the fold by portraying itself as the force behind the constitution. The shift does not, however, imply a significant increase in the overall support for the Radical/Socialist bloc.

13. (SBU) The constitution and the show of party unity that created and supported it, appears to have re-legitimized the SRS in the eyes of some of its supporters, especially those who support Kosovo remaining part of Serbia and raised lingering questions about the future of the struggling SPS. According to the hard data, the SRS has gained about 100,000 more supporters over the past month, but, at the same time, the SPS has lost approximately 100,000 voters. Overall, the support of both the SRS and SPS has remained consistent over the past year, at about one-third of the electorate. But the SRS continues to face some challenges at the local level; it has lost several Mayoral elections either to the DS or to DSS-led coalitions

with populists. According to one respected pollster, these losses are likely to encourage the party to refocus more of its energy at the local level. We continue to hear reports that one big reason for SRS interest in changing the local election law is to allow indirect elections for Mayors to reverse these losses and to possibly gain control of the big budget Mayor's office in Belgrade (Radical candidate Aleksandar Vucic was runner up in the last local elections.)

The Democrats: A Mixed Bag

14. (SBU) Some local media reported that the DS was losing strength, which latest polls confirm. However, this support is not going to any other party, but rather into the void of apathetic non-voters. The DS is still the largest democratic party, and should take in anywhere between 24 and 28 percent of the vote, but this percent is down from earlier numbers this year. Part of the DS problem stems from Tadic's dual role as president and head of the DS. Tadic is still quite popular, but this does not seem to be translating into votes for the DS. In strongholds, like Vojvodina and Belgrade, the DS continues to lose - most recently, many say, over feelings that the DS "sold out" on autonomy protections for Vojvodina in the constitutional horse-trading. The popularity of Tadic will help the DS the most if presidential and parliamentary elections are held simultaneously. Although the DS is still likely to win a significant number of seats, it will need a coalition partner, which is most likely the DSS.

15. (SBU) The DSS, on the other hand, appears to be gaining support as voters correlate the increase in daily standard of living with the current Government. Recent polls show that Serbs are more optimistic about the economy than they were six months ago. In addition, Kostunica, like the SRS, has successfully profited from the constitution, of

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which he has taken personal ownership and has portrayed the DSS as a nation building party. This, combined with his tough stance on Kosovo, appear to be helping increase his numbers.

16. (SBU) While some polls show the smaller democratic parties, such as the LDP Plus and G17 Plus, as meeting or surpassing threshold, most pollsters agree that it will be difficult and could be extremely close. SPO, in all cases and without a coalition partner, will not pass the threshold. G17 Plus leader Dinkic inexplicably dashed hopes of an SPO-G17 Plus pre-election coalition recently with public criticism of SPO leader Draskovic. While Dinkic's personal popularity is increasing in polling data, this does not seem to be translating into votes for G17 Plus. Dinkic, however, appears overconfident, believing that his popularity can take G17 Plus over the threshold without a partner. COMMENT: Our GOTV campaign plans to focus on all of these parties, regardless of size, in order to have as many democratic voices in the next Parliament as possible.

Realistic Scenarios for Forming Government

17. (SBU) Even if the SPS crosses the threshold, polls predict SRS and SPS would not be able to form a government on their own. At maximum, an SRS/SPS coalition could command 115 seats, well short of the 126 minimum needed to form a majority. The most likely scenario would be a DS/DSS coalition that also included NS and minority parties (which are not subject to the 5 percent threshold). It is possible that the DSS could choose to join the SRS and SPS to form a government, but this scenario is highly unlikely. Kostunica, despite all of his choices in the past year that have catered to the SPS, has definitively told us he would never work with the SRS. Similarly, however, Tadic has reacted very negatively to our inclusion of the LDP, a party made up of disenchanted former DS members, in our GOTV efforts and vowed never to work with the LDP.

18. (SBU) The key to curbing the number of SRS seats in Parliament is turnout--higher is better for the democrats. All major pollsters are currently reporting turnout at between 46 and 52 percent, a drop from the 58.7 percent registered in the 2003 parliamentary elections. Our polling sources tell us that the Serbian electorate's turnout on election-day always tends to be greater than the participation rate suggested by polls. Mobilizing the million-plus disaffected voters will be key to ensuring Serbia's next democratic government has a solid enough base to take more aggressive measures on things like Hague cooperation, defense reform, judicial reform, and the like.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Many here believe an optimum scenario from the standpoint of the Serbian democratic progress would be one in which smaller progressive parties cross the threshold. An LDP-led mini coalition has the potential to qualify, and its inclusion in Parliament would both bolster a democratic majority (they attract support mainly from first time voters and from "never-go-back" disillusioned DS drop outs.) and serve as a "watchdog" to ensure democratic reforms and vigorous debate replace the backroom deals and co-habitation that has plagued the current minority government from the outset. We are devoting much of our attention and resources in the coming weeks and months to our "get out the vote" strategy (reftel) that we hope will help maximize turnout by energizing the frustrated and increasingly apathetic democratic part of the electorate.